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THE COUNTRY

EDWARD THOMAS



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FELLOWSHIP BOOKS

Edited by Mary Stratton

THE COUNTRY

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By
Edward Thomas



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*"Can I forget the sweet days that have been.
The villages so green I have been in;
Llantarnam, Magor, Malpas, & Llanuwern,
Liswery, old Caerleon, & Alstern?"*

ONE evening I heard a man who had served twenty years' imprisonment in a London office and was not yet done with it, trying to prove by autobiography that all was over for him and the world because of this servitude. He was a country-bred man with a distinct London accent. Once upon a time, it seems, he had charmed a snake, caught a tench of five pounds and lost a bigger one, and, like Jefferies, heard the song of the redwing in England; now he kept somebody's accounts and wore the everlasting mourning of clerks: hence these tears. "Science," he said, in dreary anger, "Science is wearing out its eyes with staring, and soon

the best spectacles in the world will avail her nothing. Science is not final, or absolute. It is only a recent method of looking at things, and it will pass away like the method which made it not only possible but necessary to believe in witches. And what will have been its effect?

“Take, for example, a matter in which Science is supposed to have wrought a great and beneficial or at any rate ennobling change—the sense of time and space, the feeling for eternity and infinity. I believe that the average educated or partly educated man, as well as the uneducated man, now holds the story of Adam and Eve untrue, and thinks that man was only made in the image of God a little before the Reform Bill. Myths have been destroyed which helped to maintain a true and vivid acknowledgment of the mystery of the past. Science has not left us without a substitute. It has given us figures and innumerable statements, and the newspapers cannot overpraise the substitute.

And so with space. Formerly no one had any idea that the stars were a certain number of million miles away. They entered into human life : they were beautiful and useful, and mythology made them more human but not less god-like. Now they are inferior to gas and electric light. Our way of humanizing them is to say that the railway metals of Great Britain, if placed on end, would reach to the moon, or would do so if they were a little longer. We gape and gasp, and the railway is not any more divine or the moon any more human. The sky is now a very large dome pricked through by a number of lights so small as to be practically useless, and if we catch ourselves sighing at them the sigh is deepened by the thought that we are still suffering from a discredited but not extinct superstition. That the universe has been enlarged is somehow supposed to be not incompatible with the fact that the telegraph, etc., have annihilated space.

Æ “The peasant who saw his lord ride home

with apes and ivory and peacocks had the means for as sublime a view of the glories of the world as the schoolboy who could tell you the diameter of the earth. How long will it take the truths of Science to pass out of the stage of facts and figures into realities or living falsehoods? The poet Francis Thompson is one of the few who have even pretended to possess such realities. He speaks of the Earth, 'a joyous David,' dancing before God, and of a mighty Spirit unknown 'that swingeth the slow earth before the embannered Throne.' But this is not the living reality or falsehood of imagination : it is the shadowy half-truth of fancy. Poets who believed the earth and man to be two or three thousand years old had not less regard for 'the dark backward and abysm of time' than poets who are geologists.

æ “ But let me speak for myself. I am a man of the English middle class, as my people have been for several generations. We have moved among our kind. We have travelled and read. We have not been altogether dull and

blind. Yet, though we accept the statement that the earth is round, and have watched the apparent motion of the firmament and seen Capella rise and set in a summer night, though we have seen ships sink out of sight over the rim of the world—we treat the earth as flat, we point with a horizontal arm towards America, and if with a vertical arm to New Zealand, then with no more understanding than if we pointed upwards to heaven. To me who have not travelled, India is a small coloured place on a map ; if I think of its mighty rivers that place fades out of sight and I see floods larger than the land itself. The lesser stars are white sparks to me, the great are cups of fire spilt but never emptied : I distinguish them from dew-drops or glow-worms by their position overhead. The moon is something which resembles a hundred different things, from a shaving of silver or a dried Honesty seed to a dinted golden shield. The sublimest thing I know is the sea, and after that London, vast, complex, ancient, restless,

and incalculable : I pass through it at night and hear its noises like the wrath and sorrow of lions raving in bondage, and when I look up the starry sky is like a well in the forest of the city. . . . I wonder how many others feel the same, that we have been robbed—all but Mr. Charles M. Doughty—of the small intelligible England of Elizabeth and given the word Imperialism instead. Apollo, Woden, Jehovah, have been put away for the sake of unsectarian education. No wonder we are languid, fretful, and aimless.

❧ “ *There is nothing left for us to rest upon, nothing great, venerable, or mysterious, which can take us out of ourselves, and give us that more than human tranquillity now to be seen in a few old faces of a disappearing generation. To be a citizen of infinity is no compensation for the loss of that tranquillity. When we grow old what will grant any of us that look ? Certainly not statistics and the knowledge that we have lived through a time of progress unparalleled in history.*

“ As for myself, I can only hope that when I am old, ‘ in this our pinching cave,’ I shall remember chiefly the valley of the river Uther where I was born, and the small old house half encircled and half shadowed by an enormous crescent of beech-covered hills. That is my world in spite of everything. Those fifteen or twenty square miles make the one real thing that I know and cannot forget, in spite of a hundred English scenes wantonly visited and forgotten, in spite of London unforgotten and unintelligible.”

And much he had to say of that old house shadowed and smothered in leaves, and of himself doing as he liked in it and in the woods, and of the farmers, the labourers, the inn-keeper, the squire, and other well-preserved fragments of old England, and in particular of the only man he had ever met in those huge woods on the hills above his home.

“ Once only,” he said, “ I met a man in the woods. I was reaching the top of the hill, and the hounds had just streamed past me,

when a shrill voice like a bull's filled the air. A cough close by soon afterwards told me that it was a man. I looked round, and there, sitting on a beech-stump in the sun, was an old, old man, and he was leaning on a stick. His face was like a wrinkled red apple, and yet I have seen boys of twelve with older faces. It told you the boy he had been eighty years before—the dullest of boys at his books, one who was not good either at leading or obeying other boys—a mischievous, too daring, indiscreet boy, who would do anything and submit to any punishment, but was likely all of a sudden to lower his head and run at a bully, knock him down, and fall over him in a heap. All the mischief had not yet gone out of his face, though his eyes were a rheumy blue and resembled shell-fish. It was a merry face. I know now that he was probably made by hard work, beer, and women, but I should like to live another seventy years to see if this generation produces anything as fit for living on the earth.

‘I work for all,’ says the labourer on the inn-sign of the Five Alls ; and yet, I think, looking back at that old man, he often had the laugh of all the others. You may be sure there were hundreds like him in Shakespeare’s time and in Wordsworth’s, and if there aren’t a good sprinkling of them, generation after generation, I do not know what we shall come to, but I have my fears. I warrant, every man who was ever any good had a little apple-faced man or woman like this somewhere not very far back in his pedigree. Where else will he get his endurance, his knowledge of the earth, his feeling for life and for what that old man called God ? When a poet writes, I believe he is often only putting into words what such another old man puzzled out among the sheep in a long lifetime. You cannot persuade me that the peak-faced poets think of all those things about earth and men by themselves.”

☞ He concluded by saying that he had had ten years in that house and those woods, that

then his father died, he went away to school and afterwards into an office. Those ten years were the only reality in his life. Everything since had been heavy illusion without rest. "There is nothing to rest on," he said, "nothing to make a man last like the old man I met in the woods."

✚ This man's story could probably be paralleled thousands of times to-day. I have given it because unintentionally it refutes his statement that nothing is left for us to rest on. There was something firm and very mighty left even for him, though his melancholy, perverse temper could reach it only through memory. He had Nature to rest upon. He had those hills which were not himself, which he had not made, which were not made for man and yet were good to him as well as to myriads of other races, visible and invisible, that have been upon the earth and in the air, or will be in some other moment of eternity.

✚ To put it less equivocally, he had the

country to rest on. For Nature includes Fleet Street as well as the Milky Way, White-chapel as well as the valley of the Towy or the valley of the Wylfe. There are eyes, and at least one pair of human eyes, that look with as much satisfaction on a lamp-post as on a poplar-tree, and see towns as beautiful birds' nests. For most of us this visionary or God-like view is impossible except in a few particular and irrecoverable moments. We cannot make harmony out of cities : often we think it a great triumph to become blind and deaf to them and without sense of smell ; or we are proud that the rain on the windy 'bus-top has kissed us exactly as on Old Winchester Hill or Sir John's Hill at Laugharne and has brought them to mind. Roughly speaking, we still accept Cowper's hard-and-fast distinction between God-made country and man-made town. We may feel the painful splendour of our humanity in the town, but it is in the country more often that we become aware, in a sort of majestic

quiet, of the destiny which binds us to infinity and eternity. Old as the towns are so plainly—often stiff and rotten with age—we know and deeply feel that the oldest of them are as grass in the sight of the wind, the moon, even the hills. We know that it was all once “country” : we know without the help of “After London” that it will all once again be “country.” I like to see grass and flowers come down softly to take possession of any London soil that is, for a month or two, allowed to feel the sun, wind, and rain. With all their inhuman grace, lightness, and silence, the flowers and grass are related to me as the bricks, mortar, and iron are not, and I have a kind of far-off share in their victories. On the other hand I am not dismayed at a house building in a field. It can do no harm; moreover it is adventuring, it is going to mix with high, strange company, and to learn something from clouds and stars, from the long bays of corn and grass among the woods at the bases of the hills, which it will look

down on perhaps for many generations. But all towns have committed something of the sin of Babel. They are complicated and divided; they end in confusion. Before super-human eyes, no doubt, they are not confused in themselves, nor out of harmony with what is about and above them: yet for most of us Cowper's distinction is true. It was Varro's also: eighteen hundred years before Cowper he remarked that the country life was more ancient than the town life, that the country was made by divine Nature, the towns by human art.

Æ Thus it came about that the gods were born before the towns. The towns accepted the country-bred gods, and listened to the psalms of men whose speech was full of seas and mountains, lions and dragons, who said: "Surely as Tabor is among the mountains, and as Carmel by the sea, so shall he come." Away from the woods Joan of Arc could not hear her voices.

Æ For a time the towns were but large

collections of country people; perhaps it was only after the use of steam-driven machinery that other English towns than London were cut off by a wall, "with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms," from the country. In blood the townsmen have been children or grandchildren of countrymen; but the town became more than the man and at last seemed to have made him and to be well pleased with him. Statesmen who had always one foot in the country judged this to be ill, and in Rome as in England they tried to get men back—back through twenty centuries—to the land, to the country, to Nature, to the whole, where they might be healed of the town.

☞ To the townsman living where Pan could not enter, the poets sang how in the green Spring, in the smiling weather, men lie on the soft shadowed grass under the trees beside the water, and "at small cost" refresh themselves. One of them, Virgil, painted an old countryman cultivating a few rough acres,

but a king of content, having year after year the first blossom, the first honey, the first fruit. The life of the ox, said the poet, was better than the townsman's, because his food was simple, his drink water, his sleep untroubled; as, long afterwards, Walt Whitman said: "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained. . . ."

☞ To the poets themselves the fields and rivers gave health and flowing thought: they hunted, and they found "Minerva as well as Diana" upon the hills. In death, said one poet, he would fain be buried, not alongside the highway, but under a tree or among the sand-hills. So much had this country charm been lauded that Quintilian warned the orator against it. It seemed to him that retirement to beautiful groves was a pleasant end in itself rather than a stimulus to literary work, and that the trees, the rivers, the wind in the leaves, the freedom of the long-drawn views, were a distraction.

✚ As to our own poets, a century ago a sober Christian among them said:

*One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.*

Quite recently Mr. Le Gallienne advanced beyond Wordsworth so far as to sing:

*Peace of this world you shall not take,
Nay, no provision heed;
A wild rose gathered in the wood
Will bring you all your need.*

Since Wordsworth most of the poets have written of the country as if it were their home and the sky their tent, and yet seldom do they recall to my mind what Emerson, in his Journal, says of the Penobscot Indian, after he has been away some weeks a-hunting,—that he returns a different person, with an eagle eye, a wild look, a commanding carriage and gesture. Many have dwelt in streets, but

the few that write of them have in mind a "bald street" whereon breaks the "blank day," or a "city of dreadful night": the "Fleet Street Eclogues" smelt of hay more than of smoke.

☞ The city becomes our scapegoat; and we begin to see a kind of allegory in the ballad of Bessie Bell and Mary Gray, how those bonny lasses built a house on the brookside and thatched it with rushes, but the plague stole upon them out of the town and killed them, and they were buried, not with their kindred in the churchyard, but on a hill-side facing the sun. The century of Pope and Johnson is looked down on for nothing so much as for being townish and for thinking one green field like another. We forget that, nevertheless, their fields were greener than ours, and that they did not neglect them save in poetry. In their poetry the critic finds little magic, but could find, if he would, something like the pleasure given by an old building which all the architects condemn except Time.

“The Deserted Village” itself owes something to our surprise that it should have occurred at all at such a time. Far more in Shenstone, the few readable things, especially when met unexpectedly after the “Ode to a young lady somewhat too solicitous about her manner of expression,” please us unreasonably. Perhaps the fact that Shenstone died long ago, after a foolish pathetic life, is not without influence on our impressions; but I like him chiefly because he shows an easy content with natural things which is nowhere to be had to-day. And Smollett—I fancy the critic’s ears twitching at the name—has a few lines that taste of the country purely. If they stood alone, or in the work of a professed encomiast of Nature, they would be vain; but where they are, in his “Ode to Leven Water,” the lines are full of life and enjoyment:

*Pure stream in whose transparent wave
My youthful limbs I wont to lave. . . .*

Or, I should have said that to atone for the poverty of the verses I am forced to imagine a real, simple love of swimming and fishing. What is certain is that for this man the country was neither a bore nor a religion, but an unexacting neighbour. For these poets in wigs have a verily rustic sentiment. They are townsmen, preferring the town ; of the modern sad passion for Nature they have nothing ; but they love the fields in their season. Now and then they go out into the country—which is at their doors, not several hours off by rail—and their *fêtes-champêtres* have something gay and foreign to us which calls up a vision of fields more virginal than ours. There were elves in those days ; country people saw them, if poets failed : and when you were returning after nightfall from shooting, you might see torches lighting the King of the Cats to his grave. The country had always been there, and was to be there for ever. It had not yet assumed “the pale cast of thought.” They greeted it and smiled,

as men once greeted Helen, not thinking of her immortality. Thus their words in description or praise of Nature were less profuse and less precise than ours. When Dr. Thomas Parnell talks of early shepherds "printing long footsteps in the glittering grass" we have to supply what he carelessly omitted: when he says "a grove" he means about as much as Mr. ——— when he writes a score of sonnets: he suggests that being out in the country was a source of what Gay calls "amusing thoughts and peaceful hours," but not of literature. As for their prose—there are passages in Fielding, for example, which have a country sentiment not to be challenged by anything in our more elaborate style: they are of a genuine rusticity, while in the finest things of a later day the landscape is pensive with a by no means rustic colouring. That was a time when literature seems to have been diffident of using what was not suitable for general conversation; the literature of Nature represents rather the unsocial and unspoken

thoughts of men. But it would be rash to assume that, because men did not express many unsocial thoughts, they had them not. Men did not often write love-lyrics in Chaucer's day, yet I suppose they loved. The frugal lines of those eighteenth-century poets need and deserve eking out. They had their conventions, their personifications, their nymphs, for which we can spare some mockery; but at least it should be tender, since it is hard to foretell of what conventions we are to be accused by an enlightened posterity.

For those men the town was not yet a symbol of bondage, a scapegoat of civilization. In their day the countryman came up to London and had his Arabian Nights' entertainment, like Borrow, on Cornhill. This will happen less and less, because the countryman is dying out, and when we hear his voice, as in George Bourne's "Bettesworth Book," it is more foreign than French. He had long been in a decline, and now he sinks before

the *Daily Mail* like a savage before pox or whisky. Before it is too late, I hope that the Zoological Society will receive a few pairs at their Gardens. With them, or in neighbouring paddocks (or whatever, for the sake or human dignity, they are called), should be some Gypsies. They are at least as interesting, though often not as beautiful, as anything at the Zoo. At the price of a first-rate cigar one of them could be fed for a week, or a family for a bottle of wine; they will eat almost anything. They give endless quiet amusement to civilized men who behold what they have risen from, and what some would like to return to again.

Æ Countrymen, as best they can, still admire London, and would probably be willing to change places with the citizens—for a week or two. The citizens would stand their new quarters longer, with the aid of electric theatre, gramophone, and the world's adulterated news. For the truth is that to enjoy the country, pure and simple, is not the

easiest thing in the world : perhaps an art is necessary to-day to give scope even to our deep ancient instincts. At present, men use town and country to set off one another, taking smaller and smaller doses of each. The mind is, however, still its own place when there is enough of it. Men read with delight how Gunnar the Iclander was riding away into exile when his horse tripped and threw him, so that perforce he turned and beheld his home, and the sight caused him to say : “ Fair is the Lithe ; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair ; the corn-fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown ; and now I will ride back home, and not fare abroad at all ” ; and he returned an outlaw, and soon afterwards met his death. Men read this and thrill, but on the morrow take the same train to Waterloo, coming faithfully home at night to the dwelling which never seemed to them fair at all. That is the merit of the town life, to produce myriads of sympathies, few impulses.

☞ The preacher is loud in the land. Richard Jefferies plainly says : “ If you wish your children to think deep things—to know the holiest emotions—take them to the woods and hills, and give them the freedom of the meadows. . . . Put away their books, and give them the freedom of the meadows. Do it at any cost or trouble to yourselves, if you wish them to become great men and noble women.” Whitman says : “ Away then to loosen, to unstring the divine bow, so tense, so long. Away, from curtain, carpet, sofa, book. . . . Away, thou soul, . . . for one day and night at least, returning to the naked source-life of us all—to the breast of the great silent savage all-acceptive Mother. Alas, how many of us are so sodden—how many have wandered so far away, that return is almost impossible.” Sir Leslie Stephen thought mere walking a kind of panacea for literary men : still more so must it be for ordinary men. The common voice repeats : “ Back to the country, back to the mother

God gave man," or ventures so far as to say :
"Those who live in cities all the year round
. . . often seem to me to be inclined to argue
from a too narrow point of view." Men repeat the ballad of "The Gypsy Laddie" :

*The gypsies came to our good lord's gate,
And wow but they sang sweetly.*

*They sang sae sweet and sae very compleat
That down came the fair lady . . .*

and see it as another allegory, the Gypsies standing for the country, "the call of the wild," or that call of the North Sea which the Great Eastern Railway speaks of in its advertisements : another sings the folk-song of the lady who went "off with the Raggle-taggle Gypsies O" in the same sense.

Æ William James quoted from "The Story of My Heart," in one of his "Talks to Students on Some of Life's Ideals"—quoted a passage where Jefferies describes his rapturous communion on the Downs "with the earth, the sun and sky, the stars hidden by

the light, with the ocean. . . .” His comment was : “ Surely a worthless hour of life, when measured by the usual standards of commercial value. Yet in what other *kind* of value can the preciousness of any hour, made precious by any standard, consist, if it consist not in feelings of excited significance like these, engendered in some one, by what the hour contains? ” In the same paper a long passage is quoted from Mr. W. H. Hudson’s “ Idle Days in Patagonia,” describing days spent in a remote solitude among trees without sound or motion, when thought was impossible: “ To think was like setting in motion a noisy engine in my brain ; and there was something there which bade me be still, and I was forced to obey. My state was one of *suspense* and *watchfulness* : yet I had no expectation of meeting with an adventure, and felt as free from apprehension as I feel now when sitting in a room in London. The change in me was just as great and wonderful as if I had changed my identity for that

of another man or animal ; but at the time I was powerless to wonder at or speculate about it ; the state seemed familiar rather than strange, and although accompanied by a strong feeling of elation, I did not know it—did not know that something had come between me and my intellect—until I lost it and returned to my former self—to thinking and the old insipid existence.” Mr. Hudson says that he had gone back to a state representing the mental state of the pure savage. Mr. James was sorry for the person who has never been under the spell of “this mysterious sensorial life, with its irrationality—if so you like to call it—but its vigilance and its supreme felicity. The holidays of life are its most vitally significant portions, because they are, or at least should be, covered with just this kind of magically irresponsible spell.” He recommends this mental state, the freedom from those affairs which produce American tension and fatigue, as a remedy.

Æ I dare say that many a man has found in something like Mr. Hudson's noon-day pause the herb "in which his heart-cure lies." Little do we know of what those who are not writers have felt about the country, but they too have loved it, those husbandmen whom Hesiod advised to plough "when first the cuckoo uttereth his note amid the leaves of the oak and rejoiceth men over the limitless earth," and not to cross a river before praying with faces turned towards the source and washing their hands in the sweet water. They had no need of Cato's book, telling them that the farmer's life came nearest to being that of a wise man. Maybe a farmer begot the poet Alcman, who loved pea-soup, who knew all the songs of the birds, who learnt from the partridge and longed, when he was in love, to be the halcyon, the sea-blue bird of Spring flying over the waves with untroubled heart; who sang of the Mænad on the mountains milking a lioness into her golden pail to make a gleaming white cheese,

and of mad Love wantoning like a boy on the topmost flowers of the sweet gale. Not Sappho alone saw the sweet apple reddening at the crest of the tree which the pickers could not reach and so left it to furnish her with a comparison for the bride. If Heliodora was by chance a country girl and never read Meleager's verses to her or never liked them, and if she certainly could not have written them, it was not because her love of flowers was not as deep as his own.

Æ He sang : I will twine the white violet and I will twine the delicate narcissus with myrtle buds, and I will twine laughing lilies, and I will twine the sweet crocus, and I will twine therewithal the crimson hyacinth, and I will twine lovers' roses, that on balsam-curled Heliodora's temples my garland may shed its petals over the lovelocks of her hair. Certain it is that for Heliodora and for her brethren forest, mountain, and river were not simply material things, useful, indifferent, or dangerous, and that they had many times

felt what the unknown poet said of the grassy meadow, when he bade the traveller rest there ; “ Since here also, as thou listenest to the cicala’s tune, the stone-pine trembling in the wafts of west wind will lull thee, and the shepherd on the mountains piping at noon nigh the spring under a copse of leafy plane : so escaping the ardours of the autumnal dogstar thou wilt cross the height to-morrow ; trust this good counsel that Pan gives thee.” Men and women of the ploughlands and the pastures would not have been surprised at hearing that the wise king, Numa Pompilius, had his laws approved and blessed by the nymph Egeria at Diana’s shrine of Aricia. The hills and waters were alive with an unknown life, not so much body and spirit as half body, half spirit, indivisibly : whether they saw as well as heard “ old Triton blow his wreathèd horn ” is now uncertain. It has been said (by Sir Archibald Geikie in “ The Love of Nature among the Romans ”) that beyond their regard

for what was useful or agreeable to them in daily life it might perhaps be seldom possible for them to rise. But it is inaccurate to suppose that we must be detached from a thing in order to care for it : only a rarefied conscious appreciation is made possible by detachment and the severing of all bonds of necessity.

☞ Sea, mountains, "bad weather," inconvenient solitude, are unlikely to be much admired until the man who is to admire them is free from fear and in every way practically safe from them. The first will naturally be comfortable men, Roman poets, for example, not attempting to live by poetry, free to live in town or country, and therefore making a habit of variety, according to public fashion or private taste. Many of them have been born in the country and spent their most impressionable years there, so that the favourable eyes of retrospection would be turned upon childhood and country together. In later years they went into the country by

their own choice. Sea and mountains they encountered only under compulsion and disliked them. Fresh air, hot springs, freedom from enforced society, sport, desire of change, invited them to the country. The growth of cities, when they became definitely opposed to the country, would alone have sufficed to impel all who were movable out into the country. If the country had not lain ready at their gates they would have had to invent it as an antidote.

✎ With civilization, with increased safety of travel, and the multiplication of the arts and sciences of peace, the region of recreation expands, and the more various become its attractions of scenery, sport, natural history, and travel or vagabondage for their own sakes. When the under classes obtain leisure by momentary relief from the direct struggle for life they also are free to admire and enjoy what had often seemed part of the vast inhumanity of the universe. This stage is being reached in England, but probably never was

in Rome, though the Romans eloquently envied the peasants and even the bailiffs and porters at their country-houses. Apparently they had almost all our variety of country pleasures, from the extreme of luxury to the liberty of solitude. They had exhausted their religion, but not the effects of it, and the holy grove had in store a silence which seemed the voice of a god, they knew not what, as for us it is the voice of welcome to a world more spacious, of which this one is but a parish.

Æ Men had not to wait for shilling reprints before they could feel deeply about the country, apart from religion. In spite of the full cares and equally full relaxations of life when “Beowulf” was composed, men did not fail to respond to the poet speaking of an unknown land, of wolf-slopes, wind-swept headlands, perilous marsh-paths, where the mountain stream goes down under the mists of the cliffs ; or the steep rocky slopes, the narrow ways, the thin, lone paths, the beetling crags, the many homes of water-sprites and the

monster's dwelling, the turbid, blood-stained water overhung by a dismal wooded precipice. In a later age, Robert Burns and John Clare, as well as Stephen Duck, were among the poets.

§ “The oftener one comes back to the forest,” says Mr. Stewart Edward White in “The Cabin,”—a series of cheerful and lively impressions of men and Nature seventy miles from a railway,—“the more deeply one is impressed by the fact that these calm green people have entered fully into the over-philosophy we attain to only in snatches.” Here be consolations for a wet August. But I should like to have a farmer's opinion of the sentence. Mr. White is not a farmer : he is one of the less than half wild providers of wildness for a very tame public. Real countrymen have still much to learn from him as well as from Virgil.

§ In Cæsar's time and in Victoria's the plain men of Italy and Britain were far poorer in words than the townsmen who began to pitch

their villas over the Surrey hills and along the bay of Naples, planting the rhododendron, the monkey-puzzle, and the plane-tree, temperately imitating the countrymen with the help of tailors. These villa men have caused a delicate kind of scenery, semi-rural, semi-urban, where the protected wilderness, burrowed under by a railway, lies between trim exotic gardens and ploughland or pasture, and the trees on the upper slopes frame a little church of Chaucer's time and a stockbroker's stately home, nor quite conceal the more distant tower of a lunatic asylum ; or in an old wood, at the crossing of two ancient trackways, marked by a tumulus, a small legacy has placed the prettiest of gardens and the daintiest of cottagettes, to be the home of a canary bird, a Newfoundland dog, and several slender Celtic ladies.

☞ The villa men and ladies were the first "lovers of Nature," the first to talk and write of the country. The first painters of pure landscape were Dutch, not Russian. Far

different were those urban rustics, far different is Mr. White, from a man like Swift, sitting in London on March the nineteenth, 1711, writing to Stella :

“ O that we were at Laracor this fine day ! the willows begin to peep and the quicks to bud. My dream’s out : I was dreaming last night that I eat ripe cherries. And now they begin to catch the pikes, and will shortly the trouts, (pox on these ministers,) and I would fain know whether the floods were ever so high as to get over the holly bank or the river walk ; if so, then all my pikes are gone ; but I hope not.”

☞ For the villa residents and the more numerous others living “ in London and on London ” who would be or will be villa residents, all our country literature is written ; for them Mr. White has disturbed the untrodden solitudes of the mountains. Many are the varieties of this literature and its degrees of merit. It includes books of natural history and of topo-

graphy, minute or general, some dry, some decorated, some alive ; of sports treated in an instructing or an enjoying manner ; histories, descriptions innumerable ; books about houses and gardens ; several thousand volumes annually of verse up to the neck in the country, used as a subject or as a source of imagery. They broaden our horizon by introducing us to trees, animals, gypsies, peasants, and romantic vagabonds.

Æ A few of these books are the result of a genuine impulse towards literary expression ; crowds are written to order by men, women, and others, in flats, villas, farmhouses, cottages, and tents. They reveal many kinds of satisfaction in the country, which the writers regard as a source of rest, relief, stimulation, a kind of religion, poetry, cash : as a refuge for thinkers, poets, lovers, children, tired workers or players. For some the country is hardly more than an alternative to theatres, exhibitions, clubs, or pills. A large number find in a country mixture of sport, natural history,

archæology, and vagabondage, in the society of the lonely sea, what most calls out and contents their deeper genial instincts: on the hills or in forests they do not feel themselves to be mere spirits fettered to restless but heavy bodies, or mere bodies with starving spirits, but can, for “moments big as years” and even for some weeks, feel only a little lower than the animals as well as the angels. The country gives them more encouragement to moods of ease and a sense of unity with life, more obvious opportunities than the town for self-reliance and freedom from the confounding paraphernalia of civilization. Other men, like that Italian of the Renaissance, have shed tears at the sight of noble trees and waving corn-fields, and a long landscape has cured their sickness. To these and some others the country is the principal reality outside themselves: there only are they at home, and the city seems to them an accident, perhaps an unnecessary one. They do not care the less for individual men, they are not indifferent to

movements affecting multitudes, they may even have become entangled in one or another kind of social net, but they recognize only two great things, Nature and the heart of man. The extinction of a bird may rouse them, as it has done the poet, Mr. Ralph Hodgson, to sorrow both for the loss of beauty and for the wound given to an ancient order which passes man's understanding. In others the freedom and simplicity connected by them with some forms of country life foster that cultivation of the instinctive and primitive which is the fine flower of a self-conscious civilization, turning in disgust upon itself.

☞ A smaller class, probably, is the one which Mr. W. H. Hudson was led to speak of by the barrows of Beaulieu heath on a cold June evening :

“There are times and moods in which it is revealed to us, or to a few among us, that we are a survival of the past, a dying remnant of a vanished people, and are like strangers and captives among those who do not understand

us, and have no wish to do so; whose language and customs and thoughts are not ours. That 'world-strangeness' which William Watson and his fellow-poets prattle in rhyme about, those, at all events, who have what they call 'the note of modernity' in their pipings, is not in me as in them. The blue sky, the brown soil beneath, the grass, the trees, the animals, the wind, and rain, and sun, and stars, are never strange to me; for I am in and of and am one with them; and my flesh and the soil are one, and the heat in my blood and in the sunshine are one, and the winds and tempests and my passions are one. I feel the 'strangeness' only with regard to my fellow-men, especially in towns where they exist in conditions unnatural to me, but congenial to them; where they are seen in numbers and in crowds, in streets and houses, and in all places where they gather together; when I look at them, their pale civilized faces, their clothes, and hear them eagerly talking about things that do

not concern me. They are out of my world—the real world.”

☞ Such a man would understand the hermit in the old Irish poem, a king's brother, whom nothing could persuade to leave his hut in the forest, and his berries and honey and spring water, and the company of stag and badger and fox, and the song of cuckoo and thrush and wren, and the cry of heron and gull and swan, and “the voice of the wind against the branchy wood upon the deep-blue sky.” Such a man would not be astonished to hear that a wise king, giving an account of his early training, began with: “I was a listener in woods, I was a gazer at stars.”

☞ When Mr. Hudson writes of the country he reveals with a reality that has yet a visionary character the spaciousness of the great globe itself; the music of his birds and the colour of his flowers are the richer and the more grave on account of it. Very different is the country of a contemporary poet,

Mr. Walter de la Mare. The scene of one poem is a stone house, in a forest by a lake, "named only *Alas*." At the moonlit door of another lone house a traveller knocks :

*But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then,
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men.*

Or the scene is the palace of the King or Never-to-be, or a grave-yard, or "the shades of Arabia." Arabia is the name of one of the provinces of his country, and it is a proof of his mastery that he can use this name and make it so distinctly his own, while retaining all that it means to those who are neither travellers nor geographers. It would be delightful and valuable to study the soil, the air, the history, and the architecture of this country. It has palaces, châteaux, cottages, forests, orchards, grave-yards, all having some of the partly conventional, partly fan-

tastic qualities of those things to a child or to a solitary of few books and fewer travels: the grave-yard in particular is perfectly what a child might construct out of a tale and many night thoughts ; and yet I do not know where to find a more vivid sense of the grave than in this first verse of “ The Bindweed ” :

*The bindweed roots pierce down
Deeper than men do lie,
Laid in their dark-shut graves
Their slumbering kinsmen by.*

Mr. de la Mare's birds and flowers are most beautiful, but his book is not natural history. The “ Owl and Newt and Nightjar, Leveret, Bat, and Mole ” of his tomb-land are seen through a great gulf of time. The asphodel and the amaranth are among his flowers ; Lethe is among his rivers. Dreams come to him from “ gloomy Hades and the whispering shore.” His hawthorn “ hath a deathly

smell." His snow frightens the starlings by its pale glare. Witches inhabit the land, carrying "charms and spells and sorceries" in their packs. Cupid has once been met there, certainly alive. The ladies of that country are very beautiful. And after all, I scarcely hesitate to say that all have been found by the poet in these islands, and that he has embellished our *Flora* and *Fauna* more than many naturalists. He is singular but not alone, but I have no room to mention a score that would enrich these pages, and only just bare room to mention Dermot O'Byrne, who hears the voice of the Gaelic divine mother singing

*Among the tumbled rocks and the far cry
Of hidden wondrous folk that never die ;*

and Mr. William H. Davies, who has a perfectly Franciscan familiarity with natural things, and really means it when he says to the robin who is singing "half-way up his legs in snow" :

*If these crumbs of bread were pearls,
And I had no bread at home,
He should have them for that song ;
Pretty Robin Redbreast, come.*

☞ The varieties of uninspired preachers are as many. While Mr. Stewart Edward White talks of the trees as calm green people who have entered fully into an “over-philosophy” attained by men only in snatches, Mr. Algernon Blackwood, on the other hand, quotes these words from a scientist :

☞ “It is impossible to know whether or not plants are conscious ; but it is consistent with the doctrine of continuity that in all living things there is something psychic, and if we accept this point of view we must believe that in plants there exists a faint copy of what we know as consciousness in ourselves”—and then goes on to plead, with all the resources of art except conviction and the power of enchantment, for the idea that certain trees were aware of a man and loved

him and in the end won him over “across the border—into themselves—into their world of living.”

☞ These various writers find or make equal varieties among readers,—naturalists, sportsmen, rambler, of all degrees, and all combinations thereof. In every class there will be some who might say like the Roman, with a difference, that the gold and ivory images of the gods do not move them more to worship than the groves and their silences; that there is some god among them. But never again, I suppose, at least in this present civilization, will a man, save in far-off imagination, know the feeling of the ancient poet who wrote Deirdre’s “Farewell to Alba”: there she had ranged and lived wild with her hero-lover in the sun and by the sea, feasting on venison and badger’s fat and fish, sleeping among mountains and at river-mouths, loving the cuckoo’s voice in the high country and the brightness of the pure water over the sand;

never would she have left these glens and their strong places without her lover and the command of fate. As little will a man in this island to-day understand the Welsh poet's ode to David ap Jenkin, the outlawed Lancastrian, the tall Kay of the greenwood, huntsman and harper, 'good with his hands at all things, beloved of the stags and a very steward to the cuckoo : " eight woods and God shall keep thee safe " are the last words in the translation of Mr. H. Idris Bell. Not so few will yet echo that other Welsh poet's praise of the labourer : " When he pays his debt to God, a good soul and a righteous will he render up. It will be easy to the labourer of the smiling meads to put his trust in the Lord God ; he passes no judgment save on the plough-beam, brawling goes not in his company, he wages no war nor follows it, he destroys no man for his goods, he does not lord it overweeningly over us, he cloaks no wrongful claim under a fair seeming. He is made but to suffer ; there is no life, there is

no world without him. Surely it is sweeter far to him, unstained by guilt, to follow with patient long-suffering mien the plough and the ox-goad than to wear the shape of Arthur, waster of cities. Who speaks against him? . . .” Men will echo this without believing that the countryman is or necessity more virtuous, but only that his vices, like his virtues, are in the old style.

Æ All these different classes of writers and readers have behind them a thousand generations of ancestors who were shepherds, farmers, sailors, men who looked rather silently on hill, meadow, and sea, save when cursing them for inclemency or barrenness. As the man said who lived in the house under the hill: “When a poet writes he is often only putting into words what some little old countryman puzzled out among the sheep and the corn in a long lifetime.” If those men had not learned to know a good pasture ground, a good cornfield or olive garden, a good morn-

ing sky and the smell of the land at sea, the modern lovers of Nature would have been vacant before a beautiful stretch of earth, sky, or sea. Each one is the hundredth part of a hunter or a husbandman. He who has more than a hundredth part pure æsthete—he perhaps has his joys, but I wish his descendants better fortune. Haggard and chilly must be his pleasures in the English land or the English speech. He also may be adding to the accumulated significance of the country, seeing it as the site for a house or a picnic, or the subject of a picture; and doubtless there goes some religion to a house or even a picnic. But what will such a man make of a book like Professor Skeat's "Early English Proverbs," a list of proverbs current when towns were small and England merry? Those surviving to-day have a vigorous and rustic form like "Sound as a trout," or "Men cut a broad thong from unbought leather," or "There are more stars than two," with its later variant, "There are more maids than Malkin."

Some have so purely rustic a form that they can hardly survive, such as "They talk, but they never bent his bow," and its later form, "Many talk of Robin Hood that never shot with his bow." Another such is "The harm is done and—farewell fieldfare," from "Troilus and Cressida," Professor Skeat interpreting the last words as "Good riddance" because the fieldfare is a visitor who departs with Winter. We have little use now for the words, if we have for the sentiment, of "It is hard to have the wolf full and the sheep whole at the same time," or for "With an empty hand a man cannot lure hawks." There are some that could hardly be used now in the King's English, though country speech ought to preserve them; for example, "Three things drive a man from his house: smoke, dripping rain, and wicked wives," and "The man who builds his house all of sallow, whips his blind horse over the fallow, and lets his wife go on pilgrimages, is fit to be hanged." Many a proverb has reached a duller or less

rustic form. "Set a thief to catch a thief" is descended from "The best man to keep a forest is he who was once a thief of venison." There is a country difference between "Every Jack will find a Jill" and Chaucer's "There is no goose so grey at the lake but he will have a mate"; between "First come first served" and "He who comes first to the mill grinds first." We seem to see the beginning of a proverb in the mediæval form of "Nothing so bold as a blind mare"—"As bold as Bayard the blind," Bayard being a common horse's name in the old England of these proverbs.

☞ But the very æsthete finds rusticity palatable in pilules, and the complete fatherless and motherless æsthete is really an impolite fiction. No man can see hill and valley as but a pictorial arrangement of forms and colours: no man sees only with his eyes. He sees with the aid of hunter and sailor and husbandman, and also of poets of perhaps

alien blood, Callimachus, Virgil, Shelley, Emily Brontë.

☞ Take for example Emily Brontë, the dark Oread of Yorkshire moorland whose life was all “secret pleasure, secret tears.” In that gaunt solitude, the “lone home of wind and tree,” she cried :

*Give we the hills our equal prayer,
Earth's breezy hills and heaven's blue sea ;
I ask for nothing further here
But my own heart and liberty.*

She, the only poet who seems to call earth “mother” with no inaccuracy, said to the earth :

*We would not leave our nature home
For any world beyond the tomb.
NO, mother, on thy kindly breast
Let us be laid in lasting rest,
Or waken but to share with thee
A mutual immortality.*

That the trees were truly her half-sisters,

cannot be doubtful to any reader of the verse :

*Woods, you need not frown on me ;
Spectral trees, that so dolefully
Shake your heads in the dreary sky,
You need not mock so bitterly.*

☞ For they were not always friendly sisters. Her poems are full of a disturbing sense of the vicissitudes of that intimacy which forced her pen seventy years ago. The poems are herself, not her quiet ghost ; they live with beating pulses, quick breaths, dishevelled hair, bright hair, upon the mountains. Hers was a passionate intimacy, never a friendship, with the earth, so that she knew all moods of happiness except content. Her awful love of the wild country bordered on religion, and in her heart often supplanted conventional religion. It seems to belong to an earlier age, to demand a stronger body, a mind knowing less of books or having fewer obligations to indoor life. Her spirit might fittingly have possessed the

body of that fifteenth-century Welsh outlaw in his "pleasant fastness," and it is hard not to believe that it had come down to her tinged by such a one, nor to her alone, though to few other poets. Even for those without this same inheritance her "quick sympathies" have added a power to the winds of the moor, as Keats added one to its quiet when he wrote :

*Like a cirque
Of Druid stones upon a forlorn moor
When the chill rain begins at shut of eve.*

Blake did an equal service when he perceived the flowers putting forth their precious odours,

*And none can tell how from so small a centre
comes such sweet,
Forgetting that from within that centre Eternity
expands
Its ever during doors, that Og and Anak fiercely
guard.*

Æ Blake relates the flower to Eternity. Calming us with its space and patience, the country relates us all to Eternity. We go to it as would-be poets, or as solitaries, vagabonds, lovers, to escape foul air, noise, hard hats, black uniforms, multitudes, confusion, incompleteness, elaborate means without clear ends, —to escape ourselves ; and we do more than escape them. So vastly do we increase the circle of which we are the centre that we become as nothing. The larger the circle the less seems our distance from other men each at his separate centre ; and at last that distance is nothing at all in the mighty circle, and all have but one circumference. And thus we truly find ourselves. Many cannot bear this expanding circle, this devouring silence, and they seek another kind of nearness by crowding to Eastbourne or the Bay of Naples, but do not succeed entirely in evading the greatness of sun, wind, and sea.

Æ Riding or afoot, for sport, fresh society, or whatever it may be, they go spreading far

and wide, as when children pour out of the narrow school-door. They call it play because it seems only a respite from the "serious business of life," and because it is so short. They dare not take more of it: they must return to involve themselves in grimmest trifles, lest they should unmask the trifles and never return, and so break up the fabric of a few thousand years and enter that of eternity. A small number stay behind to construct some kind of simple and natural life, and their gains are great, but those of their followers less, except in so far as they can allow themselves to be absorbed in the machinery of a new order, pleasantly blinded and distracted. Hence also a gain to commerce: a fellow names a new cereal after himself, and advertises it by saying that something of the kind was once the chief food of the American Indians, "one of the most stalwart races of men the world has ever produced"; their women, he says, "ground it laboriously in hollowed stones and cooked it in a rude

manner," and yet, notwithstanding this laborious grinding and rude cooking, the corn, "together with meat taken in the chase, sustained a race of muscular giants." Some will return to the laborious grinding and the rude cooking, but not to the meat or the chase, and hope to breed a new race of muscular giants ranging benevolently over a painless planet.

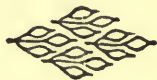
☞ The country does not resent these gentle adventurers and their cloistered wildness. It is meek in its strength. It uses neither haste nor violence, and men carve and colour the face of the land. In some moods it is even comfortable to remember how much of the pleasantness of English country men made by chance or design. The sowing of various crops, the planting of hedges and building of walls, the ordering of forests, and so on, are conscious attempts to collaborate with Nature. But as great effects are produced when men have seemed at first to ignore her. A new house, for example, however well pro-

portioned, however wisely chosen the material is always harsh to the eye and to the mind. In a hundred years it matters little what the form or the material ; if the house survives and is inhabited for a century, it has probably taken its place. If it is deserted a place is made for it yet more rapidly. Any building can be comfortably digested by the country, if left to itself, in twenty years. Palace, factory, or cottage cannot resist the wiles of frost, wind, rain, and ivy, and the building which has given itself up to them is always attractive unless the beholder happens to know why it was deserted. London deserted would become a much pleasanter place than Jefferies pictured it in "After London." The mere thought of the jackdaws who would dwell there is a cheerful one, and they would not be alone. I like to think what mysteries the shafts, the tubes, the tunnels, and the vaults would make, and what a land to discover and explore. The railway-cuttings, unless very steep-sided, soon become gracious

and impenetrable sanctuaries for plants and insects.

Æ The country has already absorbed things as huge as London. Therefore you may fancy in her smile some unkind subtlety as in La Gioconda's, but that is too flattering—not to her wisdom, but to the dignity of ages and civilizations. She is eternal, or represents eternal things: she smiles not at time, but with eternity. She gives every man what he has it in his power to see, seek, and enjoy, whether he desires green homes, grey wilds, or but a grave to be forgotten; whether he would find a solitude or create a desert, but not a solitude, by playing golf. Men help to maintain the country as they think it should be. According to their tastes they destroy or they work to preserve rights of way: while some blotch and blight the hills, others will have this hollow or that summit made a possession of the people for ever, or they save old houses or build new ones worthy to please the eyes of 1912 and 2012. The process is not always

an agreeable one. Horace complained that the villas would not leave room for the plough, and no man likes suddenly to see Deodara Villa standing at the edge of the Pilgrims' Way. But even in southern England an angle of country is always to be found purer than what had long been thought purest, to take the place of the desecrated, and greener pastures, villages deeper hid than Imber, denser copses, deserts more idle, longer emancipating views, deeper silences of that unknown god.



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